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NORTH CHICAGO -- Milton McGrew loyally served his country in the Army for three years after he was drafted in 1961. The 68-year-old veteran and resident of Waukegan recalls sweating-out long days and nights on high-alert during the Cuban Missile Crisis, expecting to defend his country in the face of a nuclear attack.

"Oh yeah, we were scared," he said.

McGrew and thousands of other veterans and active duty military personnel in Lake County who rely on the North Chicago Veterans Affairs Medical Center for their health care -- "I have a great doctor," McGrew said -- may be heartened to hear that the new federal budget calls for \$125 million for military construction at Great Lakes Navy Base, including \$99 million for completion of a new joint Veterans/Navy hospital.

Integration of VA and Navy health facilities began in 2003, when U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, won approval for the idea that he said will ensure the survival of veterans' health care in northern Illinois.

For McGrew and other veterans, the consolidation and influx of federal cash means not having to worry that the VA will inevitably be closed.

"Over the years, Congress is always trying to close military installations," McGrew said. "The VA was on the verge of being closed not too long ago. It seems like the VA in North Chicago is always on some list. But by combining with the Navy, I don't think it will be threatened anymore."

Kirk's bid in 2003 to move the Navy's mental health unit into the VA helped block Bush administration plans to close the veterans hospital in 1999 and 2000. Last fall, the congressman announced plans for the construction of the nation's first joint VA/Navy hospital on the VA

campus at Green Bay and Buckley roads.

The new hospital, which will provide care for 55,000 Illinois veterans and 40,000 naval personnel and their families, is scheduled for completion by 2010. It includes a plan for doctors and nurses from both the Navy and VA to work "seamlessly" under a "single management component" for veterans, sailors and their families. The joint venture will include pediatric care for Navy families -- never before offered in a VA facility.

The VA Medical Center recently underwent \$13 million in improvements, completed last year, including the expansion of emergency and operating rooms and waiting areas. Under the "new era of cooperation" between the VA and Department of Defense, nursing stations were modernized and new computer systems to track patient records were installed.

Kirk said the consolidation is creating a synergy leading to a higher quality of care.

"Our plan upgrades health care for the families of men and women wearing the uniform of the United States Navy to the state-of-the-art," Kirk said. "Care at a VA Medical Center now is better than at many civilian hospitals. One reason is because the VA has moved to totally electronic medical records -- reducing medical errors by more than 80 percent. It's the rare case where government is ahead of the private sector."

The federal government is also pumping money into the modernization of Great Lakes, the nation's sole facility for recruit training. Construction projects on the base include new barracks, drill halls and training facilities.

"I am very pleased the Navy and VA will invest heavily in Great Lakes, bringing hundreds of high-paying jobs to our communities," Kirk said. "Building the world's premier naval facility benefits our men and women in uniform and fosters economic growth and job creation in eastern Lake County.

Kirk estimated that more than 200 new jobs in the medical field and support personnel will be created with the construction of the new hospital.

North Chicago Mayor Leon Rockingham said he met with Kirk last week to underscore the need for more quality jobs for city residents.

"We realize that any improvements at Great Lakes and the VA spur job growth," Rockingham said Wednesday, "but we want more than jobs that leave once construction is completed. We'd like to see more minority contractors involved as well."

Other increases in the president's budget include \$12 million for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to fight gang activity through a national anti-gang initiative that includes targeting gang leaders in the suburbs.